Feral Children: Between Myth and Reality

An Interdisciplinary Essay

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Abstract

This essay examines the phenomenon of so-called feral children from an interdisciplinary perspective that brings together multiple analytical lenses. In cultural and literary representations, the feral child is often portrayed as an exceptionally adaptive, physically strong, and socially competent being. These imaginaries are contrasted in the essay with historical and clinical cases of children who grew up under conditions of extreme social isolation. This comparison reveals that such cases are in reality associated with severe and often lasting impairments in language acquisition, motor development, and socio-emotional functioning. Drawing on the critical period hypothesis and attachment theory, the essay argues that early exposure to human interaction is essential for the development of fundamental cognitive, linguistic, and relational capacities.

Keywords: feral children, social isolation, developmental psychology, mythology, critical period, language acquisition, Anna Maria Jennaert

Archetype of the Feral Child

Across historical, mythological, and cultural records, there have been accounts of so-called “feral children”, individuals purportedly raised outside the bounds of human socialization, often in conditions of extreme deprivation. One of the earliest accounts dates back to the seventh century BCE and is attributed to the Greek historian and geographer Herodotus, who describes that the Egyptian pharaoh Psammetichus I orchestrated an experiment in which two infants were raised in enforced isolation, by a shepherd who was forbidden to speak a single word to them, in an attempt to identify the primordial human language. (Wal, 2000).

Moreover, Ancient Rome itself was, according to tradition, founded by two feral children. The Greek historian Plutarch, in his well-known work Life of Romulus, recounts how two brothers, descended from the Trojan hero Aeneas, who fled to Italy after the fall of Troy, were abandoned in infancy along the river Tiber as a consequence of an honor killing, due to a dynastic dispute, and were subsequently rescued and nursed and raised by a she-wolf (Plutarch, 1914).

However, the phenomenon is by no means confined to antiquity. In modern culture, too, the archetype of the feral child remains prominent in both literature and film. The *Tarzan franchise* offers a contemporary example. The motif is likewise widespread in children’s literature, most notably in Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, which tells the story of Mowgli.

A more psychologically nuanced and distinct, representation is found in William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954), in which a group of thirty British schoolboys, following an accident, become completely isolated on an island and subsequently descend into violent conflict, ultimately degenerating into tribal power structures. This story, however, differs in important respects from the previously mentioned examples, as the children involved are

already older, have undergone prior human socialization, and function as a group. Furthermore, they retain access to elements of human technology. Nevertheless, the phenomenon may, to some extent, be situated within a comparable conceptual category.

Defining the Feral Child

But what, precisely, constitutes a feral child? According to DBNL, the term refers to "*a child who has grown up without normal human contact"* (Wal, 2000). This condition is frequently associated with significant speech impairments, physical limitations, such as difficulties in maintaining upright locomotion, and/or socially atypical or maladaptive behavior due to lack of normal socialization. (Meulink-Korf, 2006).

It may therefore be argued that the aforementioned mythological imagery is empirically inaccurate, given that the majority of characters in these myths and narratives are portrayed as highly social and empathetic beings, often endowed with extraordinary or even supernatural physical strength. Real feral children, by contrast, have never acquired such competencies through interaction with other humans, which may result in behavioral patterns that appear animal-like.

Anna Maria Jennaert

A concrete historically documented example of this phenomenon is that of Anna Maria Jennaert. Jennaert, born in Antwerp on 18 October 1698, was abducted at approximately one and a half years of age, by a soldier during the War of the Spanish Succession. She subsequently grew up in a Dutch forest, according to the source: in the care of a "wild woman," in conditions of extreme social isolation, after which she was captured by hunters near Zwolle (Kranenburg) in 1717.

At the time of her capture, she reportedly exhibited considerable features associated with severely deprived children, including limited linguistic competence, producing only indistinct vocalizations, atypical physical presentation, inclusive of a dark, coarse skin, two fused toes on her left foot, and profound difficulties in social reintegration such as requiring time to adjust to ordinary food, showing a preference for lettuce and other green vegetables. (Wal, 2000).

Patterns and Broader Implications

Several other documented cases of feral children, such as Wilde Peter of Hanover, Victor of Aveyron, Kaspar Hauser, and Genie, indicate that Anna Maria Jennaert was not an isolated anomaly, but part of a broader and historically recurring phenomenon. These cases differ in important respects, including their historical context, the nature and duration of their isolation, the circumstances under which they were discovered, and the extent to which their later development was observed and recorded. At the same time, they display a clear underlying resemblance, insofar as they all point to the profound developmental consequences of growing up without normal and sustained human contact during early childhood (Wal, 2000).

Most notably, they suggest a recurring pattern of severe disruption in language acquisition. Historical accounts also repeatedly mention atypical physical presentation and bodily limitations, implying the effects of prolonged neglect, exposure, and the absence of ordinary human care. Furthermore, these cases reveal enduring difficulties in social adaptation and reintegration, even when some degree of later learning or adjustment remained possible.

Feral children thus experience significant difficulty reintegrating into human society and often die prematurely as a consequence, particularly when separation from human contact occurs at an early age. However, this phenomenon is not limited to children; there are also accounts of individuals who, such as the American Dick Proenneke**,** whom at age 51, began a year-long experiment in complete isolation, building a log cabin by hand in the Alaskan wilderness; and subsequently chose not to return to the inhabited world. Which, although less developmentally disruptive, nonetheless demonstrate significant impacts on cognitive functioning, affective stability, and social competence (Keith, 2023).

Critical Periods and Attachment

The developmental deficits observed in feral children can be understood through two fundamental mechanisms in developmental psychology, both of which are especially influential during the earliest stages of human development.

The first is the concept of the critical period. This refers to the idea that the development of certain capacities in childhood depends on specific, time-limited phases during which the brain is particularly receptive to environmental input, such as language, movement, and social interaction. During these phases, the nervous system is especially well equipped to absorb and organize external stimuli. If such input is lacking during this period, lasting impairments may occur in the further development of these capacities. Developmental psychology literature, for example, suggests that prolonged deprivation of linguistic input in early childhood can have severe and often irreversible consequences for later language use. Similar principles have also been described in relation to the development of motor skills and the acquisition of basic forms of social behaviour (Cockx, 2023).

Attachment theory offers an additional framework for understanding the socio-emotional consequences of early deprivation. This theory is based on the premise that human

infants have an innate tendency to form a lasting emotional bond with a primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1958).

Such an attachment relationship not only serves a protective function in terms of physical safety, but also provides the foundation for the development of internal representations of the self and of others, which shape later social functioning. Research, including studies involving primates, has shown that the absence of so-called contact comfort, that is, the consistent presence of a caregiver who is physically and emotionally available, can lead to serious disturbances in social behaviour and emotional regulation (Harlow, 1958).

In cases of extreme social isolation, such as those involving feral children, this suggests that the absence of such an attachment relationship does not merely create a temporary developmental delay, but has a profound and often lasting impact on the capacity for emotional bonding and social interaction (Cockx, 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the phenomenon of feral children occupies a space at the intersection of mythology, literature, and empirical science. While cultural representations tend toward romanticization and symbolic exaggeration, empirical evidence from developmental psychology presents a far more constrained and clinically significant reality. If even adults encounter substantial difficulty reintegrating after a relatively short period of isolation, the implications for feral children, who have never been exposed to human socialization, are considerably more severe. Without sustained exposure to language, social norms, and interpersonal relationships, the acquisition of core human capacities remains severely limited, highlighting the central importance of early environmental input in shaping cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development.

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